

## **We're Not in Bloomsbury Any More: Tracing the Victorian Roots of Two Women's Religious Modernism**

**The Match Girl and the Heiress**, by Seth Koven, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014, 445 pp, illustrated, £24.95 (hardback), ISBN: 9780691158501.

'I cannot say with certainty how and when they met, but I do know that Muriel Lester and Nellie Dowell loved one other' (1). Half matter-of-fact, half startling, the opening sentence of Koven's *The Match Girl and the Heiress* bears echoes of Virginia Woolf's 'Chloe liked Olivia'. In the same way that Woolf imagined such a sentence as representing an immense social and artistic change, Koven's most recent work is hugely significant. Far more than a double biography of the global pacifist Muriel Lester and the London match-factory worker Nellie Dowell, Koven's methodology enables him to 'light a torch in that vast chamber' of historical women's subjectivity as well as illuminating important aspects of Victorian and early twentieth-century social, religious and political history.<sup>i</sup>

In the course of his history of the 'heiress' Muriel Lester, the 'match girl' Nellie Dowell and their cross-class community experiment of Kingsley Hall in the East End's Bow, Koven himself often refers to Virginia Woolf. He has a bone to pick with the Bloomsbury set and its scholars, and that is to contend that they were not the only game in town. Convincingly, he argues that over-concentration on this particular literary group has led to a lack of study of their contemporaries shaped by religious modernism. These activists' religiously-inspired social work suggests there is more to the Victorians' legacy than the Modernists' famous rejection of their values. Koven's rich depiction of social movements in the pre-war years (especially those instrumental to the founding of Kingsley Hall in 1915) reveals the significant religious counterculture in this period as he demonstrates continuities with fin de siècle mysticism, spiritualism and even mid-century Nonconformism. Instead of Woolf's abrupt historical break, Koven sees an evolution of Victorian religious paternalism into a Christian, rights-based theory of social justice through the years 1880-1930. Though he admits that the First World War marginalised those who argued for the ideal of global brotherhood, he emphasises the increasing centrality of this idea in the interwar period. Challenging the Modernists' narrative of these years as 'a "morbid age" on the verge of a catastrophic implosion' (260-261), he stresses the optimism of those in parliament seeking to use the politics of reconciliation, pioneered at Kingsley Hall, to defend peace in Europe.

In addition to this argument about periodization, Koven's work is notable for its emphasis on the cross-class relationship as a site of historical analysis. His study of this relationship enables him to engage in two larger historical projects.

The first of these is that pioneered by Ann Laura Stoler: the task of uncovering the significant place of the intimate in global history.<sup>ii</sup> This is the reason for his startling opening sentence. In starting a serious work of history with a statement about love, he is privileging intimate emotions as historical facts. But in this, he is simply following his material; Lester and Dowell lived by their conviction that their personal was the political, and Koven argues that any approach to history that ignores the intimate, especially in cases such as these, is the poorer for it. His history of Kingsley Hall reveals how living by this principle can appear

both ridiculous – for example, treating traces of toothpaste in the washbasin as a crime against society – and incredibly moving. Telling the story of Dowell's attempt to protect Lester when their peace march was attacked, Koven interprets Dowell's action as a perfect embodiment of 'politics as love and love as politics' (308). Given the importance of love to Kingsley Hall politics, and Koven's thesis, it is somewhat surprising that the book makes no reference to history of emotions scholarship. Despite this, Koven makes a convincing argument that love and its emotions are worthy of serious consideration within histories of politics of this period.

The second of Koven's interventions in larger historical projects relates to his task of telling the story of a working-class woman's development of subjectivity, particularly in the face of limited archival evidence. It is here, when attempting to trace Dowell's position as a match factory worker in the 1890s and 1900s, within the imperial circulation of labour and commodities, that Koven's reconnecting of the intimate with the global is perhaps most ambitious. Koven's thesis is convincing; Dowell's subjectivity would have been formed in relation to both the local and the global by virtue of her experiences in the international match trade. She had the opportunity to develop a working-class consciousness not only in the increasingly radicalised environment of Bow but also in the formally unionised, and democratic, industrial culture of New Zealand. In his detailed descriptions of Bow and Wellington, Koven effectively invokes the transnational as an analytical category without sacrificing the specific dynamics of the local. However, Dowell as match-factory worker remains elusive. Koven is able to speculate, credibly, that her childhood in Poor Law institutions resulted in her eschewing working-class solidarity for financial and familial security, but archival evidence of this part of Dowell's life is limited.

Koven's methodology for filling in the blanks and reconstructing Dowell's life leads to rich and rewarding readings of institutions and other cultural texts. Koven draws on the archives of Marner Street School, Forest Gate Barrack School and the Royal London Hospital among others to detail how girls and women would have experienced life in these institutions – in relation to their architecture, rules, curriculum and the ideas and philosophies that affected how they were run. He also explores how Dowell's identities, as endangered slum 'orphan', victimized 'match girl' and rough factory woman were discursively formed and fought over by Victorian tract writers and new journalists.

Dowell finally emerges through her letters to Lester, which were preserved and archived among Lester's papers. These ordinary, ungrammatical notes provide access to the cross-class relationship between Dowell and Lester. Koven delicately interprets Lester and Dowell's language of love: its basis in illness and caring for each other, its erotics of class difference and distance. In discussing the nature of their love he profitably draws on queer theory and recent scholarship on Victorian women's same-sex relationships, especially recent studies of how women such as Constance Maynard and Maude Royden interpreted female sexuality in the context of Christian religion. Most interestingly, Koven analyses the dynamics of the relationship to show how Lester's project of removing hierarchies was constantly frustrated by Dowell's eroticizing their class difference.

Koven returns to his methodology of cultural contextualisation to tell Lester's story. However, in Lester's case, Koven has a lot more archival material to draw on. Like other public women at the turn of the century, such as Constance Maynard, Lester clearly preserved

her personal papers for posterity, and wrote two works of autobiography. Though Koven does not explicitly discuss Lester's autobiography in this context, he is very aware of how Lester constructed her life story to fit her cause. To mediate the personal archive, Koven reconstructs the cultural currents which surrounded Lester and reads these alongside her writings in order to determine her influences. He is at his magisterial best when evoking the fin de siècle's 'bewilderingly lush array of countercultural critiques' (137) and tracing the intellectual connections between them.

Most significantly, in his survey of nonconformist, socialist and other movements, Koven advances the argument that more attention needs to be paid to the 'lived theology' – or 'women's theology' – of this period than simply to the written theology of particular Christian denominations. By doing this, he argues that a cross-denominational lived theology of 'God is Love' can be seen to dominate the fin de siècle and early twentieth century. Such a lived, God-is-Love theology inspired life at Kingsley Hall and its residents' relationships with one another. It enabled the whole-hearted engagement of working-class residents like Dowell in its innovations in ethical living and reconciliation, which continue to influence modern humanitarian practices.

In reconstructing Dowell's life and interpreting her writings, Koven has been able to achieve a most moving portrait of a working-class woman's experiences of love and religious practice. In addition, his story of Lester and Dowell's relationship consciously counters the Modernist narrative of the inescapability of class conflict. Cross-class sisterhood may have been impossible for Virginia Woolf, Koven says, but this was not the experience of all women. Furthermore, in revealing how she took part in Kingsley Hall's intellectual practices of restorative justice, Koven has placed the working-class Nellie Dowell back at the heart of the social work and theories for which Muriel Lester became globally known. One can only think that Lester would thank him for this.

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<sup>i</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, in *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, ed. Morag Schiach (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 106-109.

<sup>ii</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).